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AUTHOR Tatzel, Miriam
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ABSTRACT

Ego and self refer to two ways of being. They are related on the one hand to neurosis and health and on the other hand to rational and intuitive modes of consciousness. The author in this article considers consciousness as it pertains to knowing oneself. She examines how ego, the rational consciousness as applied to oneself, can obstruct objectivity and lead to confusion. There is also an examination of how self, the intuitive consciousness as applied to oneself, can transcend subjective biases and lead to clarity. (Author/PC)

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Ego and self: a synthesis of theories of consciousness and personality

Miriam Tatzel

New York City

Ego and self refer to two ways of being. They will be related on the one hand to neurosis and health and on the other hand to rational and intuitive modes of consciousness.

Other distinctions in types of consciousness that are parallel to rational and intuitive include: ordinary and altered states of consciousness (Tart, 1969), left and right brain hemispheres (Ornstein, 1972), straight and stoned thinking (Weil, 1972), west and east (Watts, 1961), and beta and alpha EEG waves (Kamiya, 1969).

The qualities of the rational mode include analysis, conceptualization, and manipulation. Ego refers to the thinking personality and involves understanding oneself in the rational mode in terms of a mind that dwells in a body and a world, but is experienced as separate from both. The qualities of the intuitive mode include wholeness, novelty, and receptivity. Self refers to the whole organism and involves understanding oneself in the intuitive mode as the center and integration point of incoming experience. Healthy personality functioning will be likened to understanding oneself in the intuitive mode, and neurosis will be likened to understanding oneself in the rational mode.

Rational consciousness can work for the survival and smooth functioning of the organism through learning to identify and manipulate appropriate objects and events in the environment. Ego develops along with rational consciousness and can be seen as the identification of oneself as the one who is identifying. The process of rational consciousness is personified as an object of its own contemplation, the ego. When rational consciousness is employed in the interests of the survival and advancement of the ego (as compared to the organism), the goal is psychological security and the assurance that "I'm OK."

The self-personification of ego is also fostered through socialization. One's position, where one lands in the world in terms of class, sex, race, birth order, etc., sets one up for certain roles and self-definitions. One accepts or rejects these definitions, but can hardly avoid seeing one's identity in terms of them. So ego is a two-fold illusion: on the one hand, thoughts create the illusion that there is a separate thinker (Krishnamurti, e.g., 1954); on the other hand, we introject what others attribute to us and believe we are that personality.

In examining personality theories, it appears that the basic disorder they identify is some form of dissociation. Splits, incongruities, being out of touch, all express this characteristic. There are discrepancies among thoughts, feelings, and actions. Behind the dissociation, at the root, are rules about what should and should not be. The rational function of manipulation is applied to oneself. "I'm feeling x and I should feel y." The attempts to do away with x and achieve y, whether they are referred to as defense mechanisms (Freud, 1949), security operations (Sullivan, 1953), or rules on experience (Laing, 1971), all point to the ego belief that you can be how you

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think you should be. The reason y is chosen over x in the first place is that y has been associated with higher self-esteem, more success and approval, and therefore less anxiety than x.

The demand to conform to an idealized image (Horney, 1945) is behind the attempts at self-control that are imposed on the body, on awareness, and on behavior. One splits oneself into a part that controls and a part that is controlled or that resists the control. These attempts at what one thinks is self-improvement create inner struggles and often boomerang; on one level, the very command to change helps strengthen the conviction that one really is the way one thinks one shouldn't be. Another consequence is that one's denied unsatisfied longings are likely to keep cropping up along with other troublesome emotions such as anger and anxiety. One gets caught in what Perls (1969) calls the self-torture game and feels torn between the extremes of self-coercion and self-indulgence. Ultimately, one is stuck in rigidified conflicts and is less available to attend to and be receptive to the ongoing present or to adapt flexibly to its real demands and possibilities.

Self is the sense of personhood that goes with intuitive consciousness. Intuitive means a direct seeing into. The self functions through organismic self-regulation. This means that without any deliberate proddings or inhibitions of appetites and motivations, by letting oneself act and react spontaneously, one will function optimally. Emotions, for example, directly inform us of how we value the events in our life, and they will freely emerge into consciousness. The ego, by contrast, in trying to actualize an image of what should be, imposes motivations upon the organism.

Functioning as a self-regulating organism contributes to wholeness in several ways. What one is experiencing is now clear and factual rather than conflicted and confused. What you do or do not like, for example, does not hinge on what the ego, for its purposes of approval or recognition, decides you should or should not like. Thus you are no longer divided against and within yourself. There are no rules about how things should be for you to impose, resist, or contradict. This state of being is healthy rather than neurotic in that instead of being split, one is now wholehearted (Horney, 1945), congruent (Rogers, 1961), integrated (Jung, 1961), and genuine (Laing, 1969).

Along with wholeness and integration, there is the appreciation of one's togetherness with others, with everything. You realize that you are not all that unique and isolated; you are actually just one more manifestation of the same patterns of nature that underlie all phenomena. This realization of unity and oneness is a hallmark of intuitive consciousness. It is a connectedness that is not merely figured out; it is seen and known directly and immediately. The dissolution of ego boundaries and the realization of oneness verges toward mysticism, some of the characteristics of which, as pointed out by James (1902), include, along with unity, a profound if ineffable sense of knowledge, a passive going along with the experience, and an optimistic affirmation of life.

How can the neurotic life-limiting functions of ego be given up and integration realized? Any attempt to deliberately stop doing something is still an ego function and only strengthens what you're trying to transcend.

There is no "answer" to how to get free of ego. What one can do is pay attention to one's doing of the ego functions. Especially note self-judgements (I'm good; I'm bad) and self-manipulations of experience (example: I'm not angry, I'm grateful) and of action (example: I won't let myself act like that again). When one starts to notice ego in action, one is no longer so "unconscious." Through increased awareness, one gains insight into how one keeps oneself stuck. By seeing into the process, ego loses its compulsiveness and the unquestioned authority it enjoys to dictate reality, and the same old reality at that.

In addition, one can pay attention to organismic functioning as well as ego functioning. One can become more aware of bodily sensations--of pleasure, pain and excitement--and also of the bridge from feelings to perceptions and on to cognitions and to the simultaneous events in the present situation that are joined with feelings and awarenesses and all together form an interrelated whole.

Attaining freedom from the tyranny of ego demands does not leave one in a state of irrational mindlessness. Rather, ego decision-making can be based on organismic preference and the objective comprehension of the situation. Objectivity arises with the release from the crippling distortions that are unwittingly imposed on experience in order to minimize anxiety over the status of one's image.

In summary, we have considered consciousness as it pertains to knowing oneself. We examined how ego, the rationinal consciousness as applied to oneself, can obstruct objectivity and lead to confusion. And we examined how self, the intuitive consciousness as applied to oneself, can transcend subjective biases and lead to clarity.

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